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ABSTRACT

In 1995, the Annenberg Rural Challenge was established to promote school reform in the rural United States. Convinced that rural schools had not been well served by the urban/industrial model of education and were not benefiting from traditional approaches to reform, the Rural Challenge pursues a mission of supporting good rural schools to become public institutions, serving and served by their communities. To achieve this mission, three interdependent program areas were created: a program of grants to clusters of schools and communities that would become a living laboratory of examples to inspire others, a policy program to advocate for rural schools and communities, and a program of public engagement to change widespread assumptions about the quality of rural education and the essential necessity of rural places. Early on, it became very clear that efforts to create new stories about school reform sparked national and local battles about values. These values concern the purposes of education, whose interests are served by public education, and who gets to make the decisions. The Rural Challenge's vision of reform is organic, indeterminate, open-ended, and holistic. The result of this vision is place-based education with five thematic areas: local culture and history, ecology, local economy, entrepreneurship, and civic engagement. Stories from Rural Challenge schools demonstrate how these themes play out in practice and engage rural students in their communities. (SV)

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KEYNOTE ADDRESS

Annenberg Rural Challenge: School Reform From A Slightly Different Point of View

Paul Nachtigal and Toni Haas, USA

In 1995, we were asked to help design, establish and run a five-year private foundation to promote school reform in the rural US, with 50 million dollars of money donated by philanthropist Walter Annenberg as part of a larger, 500 million dollar challenge grant to the nation. Frankly, the rural project was an afterthought; initially Mr. Annenberg intended his money to benefit large urban cities including New York, Philadelphia, Chicago, Los Angeles, and the San Francisco Bay Area. When a number of rural advocates pointed out that a quarter of the children in the US attend rural schools, the Annenberg Rural Challenge was created as the only national effort. The terms of the agreement were that we would match Annenberg's money, dollar for dollar, from a balance of public and private sources. The effort was governed by a 20 member Board of Directors, selected to represent rural advocates, educational reformers, rural educators, and the diversity of people who live in the rural US.

We came to this effort with 70 + or - years of experience working in school reform in state education agencies, major foundations, the federal government, and most recently 15 years running the Rural Institute for the federally supported Mid-continent Regional Education Laboratory. We were persuaded that (1) rural schools and communities had not been well served by the urban/industrial model of education which had evolved over the past 100 years and, (2) that the nature of rural schools and communities was such that traditional approaches to school reform were not appropriate. The industrialization of public education had driven a wedge between schools and communities which historically were tightly linked. The agenda for the public schools was more and more serving state and national interests rather than those of local places. We were also persuaded that quality rural schools needed to reside in strong viable communities. And, if rural communities were to remain healthy and sustainable, they needed to be served by good schools. Schools and communities needed to grow better together.

Our sense that the Rural Challenge should pursue an alternative approach to school reform did not result from our experience alone. Thomas Berry was talking about paradigm shifts. Oscar Kwagley, co-director of a Rural Challenge supported effort in Alaska, talked about the need for an alternative "world view." Human beings make sense by shaping frameworks, native healers call them stories, for understanding our experiences, then these frameworks, these stories shape us.

Over the past century, the story we have told ourselves about how and what we teach our children, and why we teach what we do, has been based on rational, technical, mechanistic ideas borrowed from the Industrial Revolution. Students were interchangeable units, to be "processed" in age-alike groups at the least cost, turned into productive workers (and tax-payers). The press has been toward a standard curriculum, divorced from any local variation, and an emphasis on private benefit.
Many Americans–typically the most advantaged and powerful–take the common good to mean an aggregate of the actions of self-interested individuals who are free to be guided by such marketplace values as competition and the accumulation of social and material resources. For them, school reform would bring policies and practices that allow individuals to exercise their preferences, maximize their private and unequal resources, and compete effectively. (Oakes, Quartz, Ryan & Lipton, 2000)

We are present at the creation of a new story. Capra describes it as, "A quiet revolution in the way that we view relationships in the natural world–from microorganisms to whales to human society–(that) underlies all modern conversations about ecology and the environment...The main challenge of our time is to create and nurture sustainable communities" (Capra, 1994).

The Rural Challenge

Guiding the Rural Challenge's efforts to create a new story for rural school reform was its mission statement: "To encourage and support good schools becoming public institutions, serving and served by their communities." Indicators included working together on the capacity to live well sustainably, action on the belief that every person contributes to our shared future, and connecting to local natural and cultural resources.

To achieve this mission, three interdependent program areas were created: a program of grants that would create a living laboratory of examples that could inspire others.

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To reduce the effects of rural isolation, we funded only clusters of schools and communities willing to work together. We began with places where there was evidence of work in progress that the Rural Challenge funding could expand or make more powerful, funded the expansion of some existing work that encouraged local student writers and artists, and eventually made grants to places with the will but not the wherewithal to do community-based work. The Rural Challenge to date has made grants in 39 of the 50 states in the amount of $37 million, and has helped local people raise a matching amount, bringing more than $74 million directly to rural students, teachers, and classrooms.

A policy program to build the capacity of rural people to advocate on their own behalf for public policy that supports rural schools and communities. The policy program has funded citizen organizing efforts in half a dozen states. It also holds hearings and symposia (face to face and through the internet), publishes a monthly newsletter to recruit policy action across the country, and sponsors a series of white papers, how-to booklets, and basic research studies.

A program of public engagement, to change widespread assumptions about the quality of rural education, the essentiality of rural places, and the need for a post-industrial story to re-form education. The public engagement program actively seeks new allies (recently for a nation-wide arts program and another with an environmental organization, the Nature Conservancy). It convenes regional, national, and topical meetings, expanding the circle of people involved with the work well beyond those who receive funding.

What became very clear early on, was that our efforts to create new stories about rural school reform engaged the Rural Challenge nationally and Rural Challenge sites locally in an ongoing battle around values. Values concerning the purposes of education. Values around who's interests get served by the public schools. And values around who gets to say, who gets to make decisions about public education.

These battles, these conversations about values, are playing out in more than 700 school and communities across the United States in some- times subtle and sometimes very overt ways. The focus of these conversations, for the most part, stem from concrete examples of students engaged in learning activities that address real issues in the local context, that are cross disciplinary, and that result in a product which contribute in some way to the life of that community.

Our vision of reform is organic, indeterminate, open-ended and holistic. Place-based education is the way we've described this work. It includes five thematic areas (the natural and built environment, the economy including entrepreneurship education or how to create jobs, local history and culture, and civic engagement). These thematic areas, if thoughtfully done, can incorporate much of what is considered a "traditional" curriculum. Central to the work of teachers is re-framing the curriculum in such a way that the important skills and knowledge are learned in the context of doing real work about issues which are important to the local community setting.

The power of the work is in the synergy among the themes.

Stories from the Rural Challenge

The real measure of the organization's success is in the behaviour of students, teachers, administrators, community members, and policy makers. We'd like to tell you brief stories from the real world. The Cultural Component of Place-Based Education. Nothing in my education prepared me to believe, or encouraged me to expect, that there was any reason to be interested in my own place. If I hoped to amount to anything, I understood, I had better take the first road east out town as fast as I could. And, like so many of my classmates, I did (Gruchow, 1995).

Cultural history is empowering. In order for rural students to invest in their rural place, they need to believe their rural place has value. And that being from that place validates who they are as well. It is important to be able to brag about the place we come from, but if we don't know the cultural history of our place, our voice stays silent and our feet move on. Students at Rural Challenge gatherings brag about their places, their rural culture: "We are the catfish capital of the world." "We have the best water in the state." "This is the friendliest place in the state." "We have the windiest river in the country." "We have the loveliest sunsets in the world." Education that is place-based sings regional folk songs, reads local authors, documents ethnic histories, records the stories of community elders, and views local citizens as unique and precious resources.

Mexican American students in border towns of Edcouch and Elsa, Texas, were stunned when their history books omitted any mention of them and what they experienced as a vibrant culture. "What about us?" they asked, "Weren't we here too?" Filling the gap in mass-produced books meant filling the halls of the school with art, photographs, quilts and other artifacts detailing local history. In the process, elders were interviewed and invited into the schools to share their wisdom. Schools became community centers, hosts to the rich but missing history, and the students went on to win prizes from the Texas State History Association for their work, available electronically on their website.

In Anderson Valley, California, part of the North Coast Rural Challenge Network, a group of junior high students have created The Oral History Project. They spent a year and a half getting to know the town's elders, and collecting their stories. The students learned digital recording techniques and spent seemingly endless hours transcribing their interviews, scanning historical and contemporary photos, and laying out the 112 page book entitled Voices of the Valley Volume I. (Volume II is currently underway with a group of ninth graders at the helm.) CDs, records, and films have followed. While the work was in progress, several of the interviewees died. Students attending the funerals of their new friends were sobered when reflecting on the timing and importance of the record they had created, and stirred to renewed efforts to know and be known by community elders.

The Civic Engagement Component of Place-Based Education

A public needs regular opportunities, occasions, meeting, or "space", to do its work; it also needs open channels of communication that are linked to crosscutting networks. Communities must have places where different people can talk about common problems--either formally, in town meetings or forums, or informally, in one-to-one or small-group conversations. These places are essential for generating political will, solving public problems and, most of all, creating citizens (Mathews, 1996).

Community health issues, youth centers, local news reporting, and social services are all elements of community building and civic engagement. Community needs can be met and common problems solved when community members team together. Local citizens know best the needs of their community; they need opportunity and space to share those needs, brainstorm possible solutions, and develop action plans. Place-based education often helps to create forums for civic engagement.

Bibb Graves School serves 450 students in grades K-12 from Millerville, Alabama and several other small communities in Clay County. Located some distance from the county seat where the only local newspaper is published, the school and its community was under-represented in the pages of that paper and all but absent from other newspapers and news sources, except for school sports and the rare but extreme incidents of crime. In response to this, The Community Connection, a newspaper written, designed, and laid out by students was begun with the help of the Program for the Academic and Cultural Enhancement of Rural Schools (PACERS). The Community Connection is a monthly newspaper and covers the school and rural east central Alabama community the school serves.

The ability of the student staff of The Community Connection to cover the serious news of the community, both negative and positive, has made the newspaper important in the community in the fundamental way the media works in a democracy. In addition to the production of The Community Connection, students from Bibb Graves School regularly contribute to the county paper and are by-lined as correspondents. The mission statement, composed by the first staff, is as follows: The Community Connection is a student publication serving Bibb Graves School and the communities from which its students come. The purpose of the paper is to train students in journalism, graphic art, entrepreneurship, and in the responsible expression of ideas, beliefs and creative vision. Our goal is to inform and entertain the citizens of our larger community, to provide an open forum for matters of concern to all, and to promote good will.

Students involved with The Community Connection report being more confident about writing and more aware of newspapers in general. Students on staff develop skills in dealing with local government officials and business owners. School relations with the community have been improved by the newspaper because the work is known to be that of students. "I can't believe kids can do all that" is one familiar comment; "It's a real newspaper," is another.

The Ecological Component of Place-Based Education

I once knew an educated lady, banded by Phi Beta Kappa, who told me that she had never heard or seen the geese that twice a year proclaim the revolving seasons to her well-insulated roof. Is education possibly a process of trading awareness for things of lesser worth? The goose who trades his is soon a pile of feathers (Leopold, 1987).

Perham, Minnesota is a lakes area. Recently, as a service to the area lakes landowners, a group of Perham students took water samples from the local lakes. In addition to saving the city and landowners money, some of the results were alarming. The results of the student's testing showed high levels of run-off from area farms and nearby factories. As a result of their research and findings, students testified before the legislature and helped influence safe water policies.

The Yampa Valley Legacy Educational Initiative involves four school districts in Northwest Colorado. These districts span the entire length of the Yampa River, from the headwaters in Flat Top Wilderness Area to its confluence with the Green River on the Colorado/Utah border. The bio-region of this river valley is increasingly becoming the focus of study for the students in these districts. The full range of issues facing mountain communities are present with the often conflicting interests of land developers, environmentalists, ranchers, miners. The Initiative is designed to preserve the legacy of the

Yampa River Valley by engaging the students in understanding the area economically, ecologically, socially, historically as well as appreciating the beauty of the region.

The Economic Component of Place-Based Education

Rural children have been educated to believe that opportunity of every kind lies elsewhere and that the last half century's rural experience of failure and decline has been largely due to the incompetence, or irrelevance, of rural people (Gruchow, 1995, p 91).

Students at Howard High School in Howard, South Dakota (part of the Program for Rural School and Community Renewal) conducted a local cash flow study that drastically affected spending in their community. The Rural Challenge Evaluation Team describes this study as follows: Place has become more dominant in the curriculum of Howard High School as a result of the phenomenal impact of an initial inquiry into the spending patterns of local residents which resulted in increased spending within Miner County [South Dakota] by 27%, an amazing $15,600,000 impact. Acting on a report from the city council that revenue from taxes was declining below that needed to provide community services, Future Business Leaders of America students designed and conducted a community survey and analysis to determine whether and/or where taxable income was spent--in the town, county, or elsewhere. Not only did the results inform students and local citizens where their disposable income was being spent, it also raised concerns about the local economy. Students found that residents were regularly driving to Sioux Falls, an urban center miles away, to avail themselves of a greater number of choices and often the cheaper prices that the chain stores could offer. When store owners, businesses and community members were sensitized to the potential gains that would come from residents spending just 10% more in their county, changes were made by both sellers and consumers. This all occurred in a year in which 100 workers were laid off by the sole manufacturer and largest employer in Miner County. This increased tax revenue boosted support for essential county services, providing hope that Miner County residents can stem the tide that is disintegrating rural communities in the heartland (Learning in Place, 2000, pp 34-35, 37).

The Entrepreneurial Component of Place-Based Education

Understanding where we are and how we got there are only the first two steps. We also need to help young people understand how to create different futures for themselves. Rural schools should teach how to create jobs, not just how to get jobs working for someone else. Entrepreneurship education is vital to the survival of rural communities and can be offered as a community service to all citizens (Haas & Nachtigal, 1998).

Students with entrepreneurial experience gain self-confidence, pride in the possibilities of their local place, and skills that transfer to post-secondary education and careers. Her senior year in high school, Kendra Austin, of Chattoroy, Washington, opened a business with two classmates, Meca Liquidations. They bought surplus office supplies from large companies and resold them to nonprofit organizations. Austin submitted her business plan to Johnson and Wales University in Providence, Rhode Island and won a scholarship.

Schools as institutions are also taking on an entrepreneurial stance towards their role in the community. The last business on Main Street in Rutland, South Dakota had long been closed when the students in the school decided to undertake a feasibility study to open a contemporary version of the old general store. After much study, school board was persuaded that building and operating such a business would not only be providing good educational opportunities for the students but also provide a real service to the community. The store now provides basic food products, videos, gasoline, a snack bar and, perhaps most importantly, a community gathering place for both youth and adults.

Examples of Expanding Place-based Learning

As place-based learning becomes more established, student work becomes more complex, more imbedded in the life of the local and less easily categorized within neat boundaries. The following stories are examples of such work.

Shelby Valley, Kentucky

Students, teachers, and community members in Shelby Valley, Kentucky have tapped into the civic engagement, cultural, and ecological components of place-based education through their community involvement. Student-facilitated public forums and student citizen action work are two avenues students from the Appalachian Rural Education Network use to demonstrate their leadership abilities. Students have facilitated two public forums engaging the public in identifying the needs of the communities in the Shelby Valley area of eastern Kentucky.

As a result of these forums, two committees were established: a Community Parks Committee and an Appalachian Heritage Outreach Committee. The Community Parks Committee has submitted plans to the Pike County School Board and the Pike County Fiscal Court for parks to be created at the G. F. Johnson Elementary School and Shelby Valley High School sites.

The Appalachian Heritage Outreach Committee (composed of teachers, student leaders, and community members) submitted a proposal to the Pike County Arts Council to support an Artists-in-Education Program within the consortia of schools in the Shelby Valley area.

Additionally, students from Shelby Valley High School and G. F. Johnson Elementary School are currently involved in student citizen action work building student engagement related to mountaintop removal in eastern Kentucky. Student project leaders and other citizens from Longfork of Shelby Creek organized a group of students and community members to attend a rally in Frankfort, Kentucky to protest mountaintop removal.

I really have respect for these young people who want to give of their time and energy to help improve our communities in the Shelby Valley area. It is good to know that there are young people who care about their communities. They are to be commended for their work. Estil Stewart, Mr. Stewart, a long-time resident and community leader from Long Fork of Shelby Creek, was the first to present his idea and a budget for the development of a community park on Long Fork. He and other community leaders on Long Fork and students with the Summer Work Program have already contributed many hours of labor toward this project. Due to their efforts, the site for the community park has already "taken on a new look" according to Mr. Stewart. Citizens have volunteered to keep the field mowed, have constructed picnic tables and park benches, and have kept the area free of litter.

Mendocino, California

Cultural and civic engagement components of place-based education come together in Mendocino, California. The North Coast Rural Challenge Network has helped the Chinese Temple Foundation restore and preserve the Temple of Kwan Tai in Mendocino, California. This original Taoist temple is about three blocks from the high school. Students walk by it daily; but few students had any idea what it was, why it was red and green, why it faced the ocean. Lack of funds and support made it impossible for the temple to be maintained. This national historic monument was going to collapse from neglect unless something was done.

Students began by researching the temple. They conducted interviews, analyzed primary documents, and created databases. A student written and produced video chronicled their research and the history of the temple. It has become a piece of preservation history, entered into the National Historic Preservation section in the Library of Congress. Students have used the film as evidence of community embedded curriculum. Some have become docents for the temple. Additionally, the Temple Foundation has used the video created by students as supplemental grant materials. A National Preservation Grant to restore the exterior of the temple was secured with the help of the student researchers. The student interest, study, and support of the temple has provided means for saving the historic monument.

Lubec, Maine

The economic and ecological components of place-based education are tightly woven in the aquiculture, hydroponics, and marine research work of students in Lubec, Maine. Student work in Lubec is helping to revitalize the economy as well as the school curriculum of this coastal community.

In the early 1990's, students initiated a tidal water quality program and clam study. This initial work has now evolved to an aquiculture program that has resulted in the re-energizing of the high school curriculum and the renovation of an abandoned waste treatment building into a state-of-the-art wet laboratory for fish farming and research.

Students are currently conducting aquiculture research on sea urchin diet and trout farming. They have created a video tape used by local fisherman documenting the challenges faced by the local marina and have recently built a greenhouse. Last year, young people were instrumental in retaining a lease from the Maine Marine Resources for a pen in the Cobbscook Bay. The community of Lubec, despite its history of social fragmentation and economic hardship, has rallied behind the student-initiated work. Last year, for the second consecutive year, the community allocated $15,000 for the Aquiculture Center.

The Power of Place-Based Education

Madeline Gibson works as a Circuit Rider with a network of schools and teachers in Appalachia engaged in place-based education. She travels between isolated schools and communities in her region and helps with the dissemination of information, idea sharing, professional development, and networking support for teachers involved with place-based education. She wrote the following about the power of learning and honoring one's place:

I have always heard the saying that "Knowledge is power." I must now adapt that statement to "Knowledge about place is powerful and empowering." Schools have always been full of knowledge. Facts, statistics, historical events, words, definitions, and abstract ideas have always filled the texts used by teachers and students. And yet, in my experience, most of this knowledge floated around for a while and then became used and discarded like the graded work of students thrown in wastebaskets. For most, this

knowledge did not live and, at best, intimidated students by its bulk. Teachers, too, were overwhelmed by the task of motivating students to attack and master the knowledge.

But teaching by using place is different. Teachers and students work as a team to make decisions and to learn interesting facts about places and people they know. Learning becomes exciting and people (teachers, students, and community members) become eager again. This excitement and eagerness is evident in every school I visit where place has a part in the curriculum...

Teachers feel good about what they are doing. Students feel good about what they are doing. How often do we hear these statements? Most of the time, teaching is equated with struggle. Curriculum involving place does not eliminate these problems, but it does make learning more fun and more applicable to the student and teacher...

The most important reason for my love of the role I have played in the Network is straight from my heart: we add value. As an Appalachian child myself (many years ago), I never felt value in myself, my life, or my place at school. My family was very important to me and gave me my personal values. But my school took my language (my dialect) and forced me to change; my school had no books relating to my place; and the outside world was glorified to be so much better than where I lived. At school, I learned to be ashamed of my speech, my family's customs, and my heritage.
I do not blame my teachers. Many times they were educated elsewhere and had suffered because of their language, customs, and heritage. I think they were trying to help us adapt and not be hurt as they had been. But, in doing so, they taught me that I was not good enough as I was.

Our students in Network schools will not feel what I felt. Their language is valued. Their family customs are valued. They write papers, create videos, and do oral histories. They value their families. They research the history of the places in which they live, and they see the connections between yesterday and today. History is real and the knowledge they gather is alive.

And the power is within. The people (community, students, and teachers) gain knowledge and use the knowledge. They gain skills and develop talents and abilities. They feel pride. This great invisible current of energy fills the Network and makes its worth immeasurable. I am so appreciative of being able to be a part of it (Learning in Place, 2000, pp. 83-84).

What We Have Learned

Place-based education is neither "conservative" nor "liberal" in the traditional political sense of those terms.

Place-based education is not romantic or nostalgic, trying to bring back the "good old days". The purposes are for every individual to find a way to live well in a sustainable way. Nature, the ecology, is the bottom line. In the words of Wes Jackson,"Nature is the measure."

Public education policy is based on a particular set of values, e.g. efficiency, effectiveness, competition, serving business/corporate interests. Redefining what is important to a society, what is valued, is difficult and long term at best.

The existing policy climate is not friendly to place-based learning. While creative teachers have found ways to meet state standards through place-based education, high stakes testing is seen as counter productive

Concrete examples of place-based learning are needed to focus conversations on alternative ways of thinking about the fundamental questions of "What is education for?" "Whose interests are served?" "Who gets to say?"

Extensive conversations are needed with school and community leaders prior to agreeing to work together on school reform which holds to a set of values that are different from those being promoted in the current school reform agenda.

The Rural Challenge reform strategy was/is designed to empower folks at the local level, teachers, students, administrators, community leaders, to create educational programs which would serve their communities. Schools and communities in poor minority communities appeared not to have the sense of efficacy needed to take advantage of this opportunity.

The most successful place-based sites are those where there is a growing consensus around an over arching issue or set of issues, e.g. protecting a river or watershed, preserving the local culture or a particular life style and where these issues are a major focus of student work.
Learning becomes more interesting and more powerful when students are engaged in issues that are connected with their lives, their communities, their environment.

Schools and communities must grow together. One cannot re-form schools without re-forming communities.

The best way to engage communities with their schools is to engage students in the community.

Summary/recommendations

The Rural Challenge, supported by a $50 million commitment from the Annenberg Foundation was a one time event. It is likely not likely to be repeated. So, how should we proceed to improve rural schools and

communities. An over-riding lesson is that while some discretionary money is useful, it is not the most important thing. Too much money can get in the way of what needs to be done. What is most needed as we begin the new millennium is to re-examine our set of beliefs which form our existing "world view". Place-based education at its core is about common sense, how do we learn to live well where we are. David Orr (1994) says it best "...Education is no guarantee of decency, prudence, or wisdom. More of the same kind of education will only compound our problems. This is not an argument for ignorance but rather a statement that the work of education must now be measured against the standards of decency and human survival-the issues now looming so large before us in the twenty-first century. It is not education, but education of a certain kind, that will save us.

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